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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS #20: OPPOSITION PRD STRUGGLES  
FOR A COMEBACK

REF: A. SANTO DOMINGO 1557

[1](#)B. SANTO DOMINGO 1304

[1](#)1. (SBU) This is #20 in our current series on politics in the  
Dominican Republic:

The Opposition PRD Struggles for a Comeback

The Great Revival

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The main opposition Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD), tied  
up in factional and personal recriminations since losing  
office last year, is seeking to revive itself as an  
alternative. Mindful of the requirement for a November  
primary to select candidates for congressional and municipal  
elections next year, after repeated postponements the PRD  
plans an "ordinary convention" (national vote), tentatively  
in May, to elect new party leadership. As the organizing  
committee rushes to complete a voter registration list, some  
party veterans want to postpone, because many PRD members are  
still demoralized and might stay home. The "ordinary  
convention" will be the first since 1991, a stark reminder of  
the PRD's autocratic and clientelistic methods over the  
years. Rules revised this year allow the PRD rank and file  
to choose from a throng of candidates a party president,  
secretary general, secretary of organization, and other

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officials down to the local level -- some 50,000 in all.

Cacophony in Congress

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The new PRD leaders will face an immediate task: to convert  
"a swarm of crickets" (as one cynic put it) into a  
disciplined opposition to President Fernandez,s  
administration. Freelancing PRD lawmakers have ignored the  
party, defied instructions from party president Vicente  
Sanchez Baret, and accused each other of corruption. Senate  
President Andres Bautista on three occasions failed to  
assemble a quorum, once last November in the struggle to  
repeal a CAFTA-unfriendly tax, and recently because his  
no-show PRD colleagues were protesting the government's  
investigations of corruption in the previous (PRD)  
administration. House of Representatives President Alfredo  
Pacheco (PRD) has suggested that Senator Alejandro Santos  
(PRD), chairman of the Senate industry and trade committee,  
might be subverting CAFTA-DR ratification, a national  
priority.

From February 22 to March 29 PRD senators prevented votes on  
government proposals and delayed passage of crucial financial  
measures. In late March and early April they finally passed  
these bills of urgent national interest, but critics have  
been demanding more responsible behavior. The PRD blocs in  
both houses sit squarely astride Fernandez's path to  
obtaining essential legislation for fundamental tax reform  
and for next year,s budget. .

From Values to Vices

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To prepare for elections in 2006 and 2008, the PRD will have  
to reinvent itself. A party that for decades championed  
social democratic values and social justice is more than ever  
viewed as devoid of ideals, and energized only by its  
leaders, scramble for personal, factional, and financial  
gain. Mejia,s bulldozer drive for re-election in 2004,  
against many in his party, is emblematic and still resented.  
The party,s moral credentials have sunk almost as low as  
when, in the late 1980s, President Balaguer (PRSC) prosecuted  
and imprisoned former President Jorge Blanco (PRD) for  
corruption. Investigations of alleged wrongdoing in the  
Mejia administration (2000-2004) prompt many Dominicans to  
dismiss the last four years as the worst ever in the

country's democratic political history. Memories dim; the wholesale abuses in PRD governments from 1978 to 1986 were worse.

Fernandez's prosecutors are probing the previous administration's ties with drug trafficker Quirino Paulino and other questionable activities. Last month they seized documents from a former under secretary of the Environment Ministry alleged to have supervised construction of Mejia's spacious new mountain home in Jarabacoa, complete with extensive greenhouses. Those greenhouses are said to have been among at least 51 that were distributed to government officials or family members, including former agricultural secretary Eligio Jaquez, of a total of 200 greenhouses that the government had acquired with a Spanish loan. One contact says that when the builders purchased supplies from a PRSC-affiliated hardware store, instead of from three PRD-affiliated ones, the local PRD organization boycotted the election, handing Fernandez a victory in that province. A recent cartoon in *Listin diario* comments, "For Hipolito's house in Jarabacoa to have cost 6 million pesos (USD 210,000), they must have had Mandrake the Magician as the engineer...."

#### Fractured but Formidable

Split by ambition and tarnished by scandal, the PRD still has formidable resources. It controls Congress, with 28 of 32 senators and at least 63 of 150 deputies. The ruling PLD, by contrast, has only 1 senator and 42 deputies. It controls about 115 of 135 municipalities. And it has the country's most extensive grass-roots party organization, far larger than that of the PLD. PRD leaders believe this base will enable the party to retain many Congressional seats after 2006 -- by mobilizing the local vote -- even if it loses some of them. In 2004, in the poorest presidential election performance ever by the PRD, it still got 1.2 million votes or 34 percent of the total -- much higher than the 24 percent won by the PLD runner-up in the 2000 presidential race.

More than two-thirds of PRD members polled late last year said they wanted new, more responsive, more transparent, less corrupt leadership. A party assembly in November approved more than 200 revisions to the PRD statutes. The revisions explicitly ban PRD candidates from seeking re-election. They introduce for the first time a direct, nationwide vote of the party's registered members to select party officers, replacing the horse-trading by delegates at PRD conventions.

Mobilizing those members will not be easy. Some party organizers fear that a poorly prepared vote will attract as few as 150,000 participants, de-legitimizing the results. A recent poll estimated support for the PRD to have sunk to 10 percent of the electorate. The incoming administration fired as many as 300,000 public employees appointed by Mejia, of a total government workforce of 400,000. Many of those PRD members and their families, now without regular employment or income in a job-scarce economy, are dejected and disengaged.

#### Wanted: A Few Good Leaders

Organizational fixes alone will not solve the PRD's leadership problem. Charisma still counts and is in short supply in today's PRD. A cartoon shows a scanning from the dome of the national palace: "Sir, no invaders on the coast. From here no sign of any opposition leader worthy of note." It is symptomatic that Mejia (Ref A) retains more popularity in the party than anyone else -- and not simply because of gratitude for former presidential largesse. His down-to-earth country manner, disparaged by others in the PRD elite, has wide appeal among more modest Dominicans. Beyond him, there are no stars. When expelled former PRD president Hatuey De Camps quit the PRD last month to found a new rival party, he deprived the PRD of its most forceful populist orator (Ref B).

At least half a dozen candidates are jostling for the PRD presidency. The more notable contenders:

Emmanuel Esquea, former party president (1998-99) and palace legal adviser to former President Jorge Blanco (1982-86), repeatedly turned down offers of senior jobs under Mejia. A party elder, whom some see as rigidly legalistic and too close to powerful business interests.

Former Attorney General Virgilio Bello Rosa (2000-02) resigned over abuses in the Mejia administration and has eloquently urged reforms, but is not well known outside legal circles. Both have concentrated their fire on the PRD's internal faults, not on the Fernandez administration.

Senator Ramon Alburquerque, influential among his congressional colleagues, has on several occasions delayed or amended bills proposed by the administration. Another grey

head.

Former culture minister under Mejia (2000-2004) Tony Raful, a poet and writer who is currently the PRD,s executive vice president, serves as party spokesman and liaison among the various factions. His colleagues privately fault him for lacking gravitas (in a local Spanish expression, "he has no claws").

The Jorge Clan vs. the Mafia

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To replace PRD Secretary General Rafael "Fello" Subervi, the young former telecommunications chief Orlando Jorge Mera has become the preferred candidate of the party elite, thanks in part to his still-influential father, former president Jorge Blanco. An unobjectionable technocrat, Jorge Mera airs his bland opinions regularly in news columns and on TV. He stands out against the less savory competition, especially Mejia,s former legal adviser Guido Gomez Mazara, generally disliked for his arrogance, unpredictability, and links to organized crime. Some warn of a possible alliance between Gomez and another unscrupulous candidate -- backed by Subervi -- who together might defeat Jorge Mera.

Faded Glories

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The only known PRD aspirants to the nation,s presidency in 2008 are faded, jaded, distrusted, or treading carefully:

Former Vice President Milagros Ortiz-Bosch, having lost many previous supporters by her contradictory and dilatory behavior in the 2004 election, is trying to redeem herself as chair of the "ordinary convention" organizing committee. One PRD insider recently dismissed her as "a plastic star."

PRD Secretary General Subervi, machine politician extraordinaire, is tinged with past corruption. Rumor has it that he is conspiring with Mejia,s former public works minister, wealthy businessman Miguel Vargas Maldonado, to advance Vargas,s own presidential aspirations.

For now former president Mejia, despite his periodic public appearances and criticisms of Fernandez, is staying close to the bunker as his close associates dodge incoming scandals. He is constitutionally barred from mounting a third presidential campaign. Even so, many in the PRD -- including some of those who blame him for the party,s current troubles -- long for his return. They remember the truculent, folksy, quick-witted personality who grabbed the reins after the death of the legendary Jose Francisco Pena Gomez and spurred them on to victory five years ago. Admirers say Hipolito may be the only figure capable of sorting out the PRD,s leadership mess, anointing a successor to run the party, and grooming another to carry its standard in the 2008 presidential election.

12. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell.

13. (U) This piece and others in our series can be consulted on our classified SIPRNET site <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/> along with extensive other material.

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